DO WHATEVER IT TAKES

By CWO2 John Salgado

My command is like any other Navy squadron: We have well-intentioned technicians who must maintain aircraft in a high-tempo climate. This can-do spirit can cause problems, and one of the most difficult duties a leader faces is to restrain such enthusiasm. Our Sailors want to get the job done, but, too often, they use shortcuts because of a false sense of urgency.

During a recent incident, a young petty officer assigned a motivated but untrained technician to a simple task. That Sailor caused a ground mishap when he drove an support-equipment tow tractor—with an nitrogen-servicing cart attached—into the horizontal stab on the port, aft side of a Hornet. You can guess the scenario: A young, inexperienced and unlicensed maintainer wants to do a good job, but he ends up doing more harm than good.

The workcenter supervisor told this maintainer to do pre-carrier qualification maintenance on four squadron aircraft. This job required the servicing cart to be moved from one aircraft to another—a job normally done with a tow tractor. The technician didn't tell his supervisor about the lack of a license, and the supervisor didn't make sure the maintainer was qualified. This highly motivated technician serviced the nose tires to 375 psi, the mainmount tires to 350 psi, and then moved on to the other aircraft.

On his way to finish the last jet, his lack of experience and skill shone through. Turning the tractor toward the port side of aircraft 411, he did not pay attention to the distance between the tug and the aircraft. He smashed the tractor's "hooch" into the trailing edge of the horizontal stabilizer.

This incident cost our command several thousand dollars to fix the aircraft, tow tractor, and nitrogen cart. The support equipment was damaged when the tractor jackknifed, damaging the front right side of the tug, bending the frame on the nitrogen cart, and damaging a wheel.

A review of the incident revealed that controls existed to prevent the mishap. At the night-shift maintenance meeting, a maintenance-control chief stated only licensed tow-tractor drivers should operate tractors. The airframes LPO passed along this requirement, and no night-shift airframer was licensed to drive tow tractors. Other workcenters did have qualified tractor drivers, and they were available at the time of the incident.

The night-shift supervisor assigned those pre-CQ maintenance tasks to an unlicensed technician but wasn't able to supervise the enthusiastic Sailor, and the rest of the story is in the book of lessons learned.

We discovered an attitude existed that it wasn't a big deal to drive around a tow tractor and nitrogen servicing cart—even if you didn't have a license for it. We also found we needed to improve our license issue and monitor process.

We train and qualify people to operate SE gear for several reasons: to keep them from injuring themselves or other Sailors, or from damaging equipment. It takes a leader to stand up, to set the rules, to disavow shortcuts, and to set the example.

Warrant Officer Salgado is the QA officer at VFA-87.

IT TAKES TWO

By AE2 Michael Patton


Park two aircraft near each other and anything can happen.

Photo by PHAN Chris M. Valdez

It was the first day of cruise, and I was excited because I had been selected as the AE shop's night-check supervisor. I was proud, looked forward to doing a good job, and wanted to show the squadron my worth. It didn't take too long for my first challenge.

The pace was slow that first evening: I went down to the hangar bay with an AE3 to work on some up gripes, including one on a cockpit light. The hangar bay was crowded with aircraft, and our jet was parked next to a Hornet from another squadron—a little too close for the Air Force but just right for a carrier.

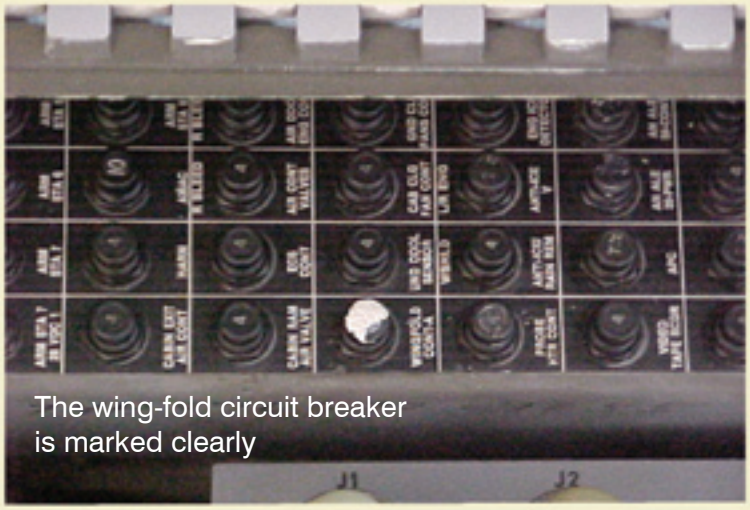
While my partner pulled out a power cord, I did a walk-around and checked the safety pins and circuit breakers. I was anxious to begin and did not notice the flags for the wing-fold pins were not hanging under the wings. The power cord now was plugged in, and my shipmate was in the cockpit, waiting on me to turn on the power. Doors 10L and 10R still were latched, but the bird just had come down from the roof, and I just **assumed** the PCs had pulled the circuit breakers after shutdown. The chain of events almost was complete. I walked over to the bulkhead and got ready to apply power. The PO3 signaled, and I hit the button.

I did not know the ordnance shop had removed an AIM-9 from the wing-tip station before the aircraft had come down from the roof, and they manually had cranked up the wings. They also did not put the wing-fold handle in the "hold" position. Leaving that handle in the "spread" position would allow the wings to open up when power was applied.

A Hornet's outer wings spread quickly, and, as I made my way around a jumbled area of SE, the EDU's quiet drone never reached my ears. Aircraft 215 looked different at first glance, but, in the cockpit, my AE3's actions told me something was wrong. The wings spread as soon as electrical power was applied, and the starboard LAU-7 came to rest on the canopy of a neighboring FA-18.

The AE3 secured power before more serious damage occurred. He then ran to the shop and grabbed the wing-fold speed handle and manually cranked the wing off the canopy. The other aircraft was damaged slightly.

The pressure that develops during high-tempo ops, especially with an uncooperative aircraft, can make maintainers try to do jobs from memory. When we make that wrong decision, a lot of little things can add up and can lead to minor mistakes or even a mishap. Had that canopy shattered, the incident would have cost a bundle, and we would have had to wait a long time for a new canopy.


The wing-fold circuit breaker is marked clearly

I learned that a thorough walk-around and a better grasp of procedures could have prevented this incident. No substitute for experience exists, though, and I certainly will not make the same mistake again.

Petty Officer Patton works in the AE shop at VFA-27.


There's a big difference when the wing-fold handle is in the spread position, rather than hold.